



## Does it ever stop kicking off everywhere?

Maria Vlachou

### review of

Mason, P. (2012) *Why it's kicking off everywhere*. London: Verso Books. (PB, pp. 237, £12.99, ISBN 9781844678518)

### Introduction

Paul Mason's book is an attempt to explore and understand the global domino of uprisings around the world in 2009-2011. *Why it's kicking off everywhere* brings together some of the many localities of the world that gained global attention from the media and filled people with hope for another, better future. Protests, demonstrations, and revolutions in Egypt, Greece, Britain, and the US are closely followed by Mason who, as a virtuoso reporter, communicates vividly both the feeling of those moments and the stories of the people:

We had to walk in twos at first – this was my first protest and I didn't know why, but they said it's because of the Emergency Law: more than two is illegal. Then someone gave me a paper with lawyers' numbers 'in case you get detained' – and I am going: 'Whoa, whoa, who!' Her eyes whiten as she relives it... . (p. 12)

In a way, the book and the events that it discusses are unfolding together. As long as one keeps in mind that the book tries to give answers to all the rapidly moving changes, without affording to look through a retrospective lens, and that it is a polemical journalistic piece, one can relax and enjoy this rather turbulent ride.

In this review, first, I will look at Mason's discussion of the role of young people in the global uprisings, which is one of the major themes of the book. The close connections with employability within the current neoliberal political economy will also be discussed. Although Mason rushes to declare that his book does not belong to social science and that it does not 'claim to be a theory of everything' (p. 2) in the book's very first pages, there are plenty of suggestions and claims throughout the book. In particular, he attributes a central role to technology and social networks, which, although important, seems to be exaggerated at times. This will be the second theme in this review. Finally, I will comment on the second edition of the book.

### Young people in the global uprisings

The role of young people in the global uprisings, from the Arab spring to the student demonstrations in the UK, is a theme that runs through the entire book, but the discussion is more detailed in Chapter 3. In particular, he concentrates here on the new political subject emerging from the British student riots.

It is on that basis that Mason shows sympathy for the protestors, calling on the reader to stop underestimating the new generation.

Student activism is usually associated with a specific decade (the 1960s), or in order to be more accurate, with a particular year, 1968 (Boren, 2001: 149), and there is an assumption that 'such days were gone – such idealism, such creativity and hope' (Mason, 2012: 4). This claim would be supported by Readings (1999), who considers contemporary students as apolitical and mainly concentrated on their personal careers:

In a sense, part of what happened in 1968 as revolution happens now as student apathy, which is another name for consumerism: a massive disaffection from the institution and from the modern contract between the University and the nation-state...[there is a] widespread sense among undergraduate students in North America that they are 'parked' at the University-taking courses, acquiring credits, waiting to graduate...What they are engaged in is *self-accreditation*, preparing for the job market... (Readings, 1999, p: 138, original emphasis)

However, according to Mason, what seems to unfold is not a new apathetic, indifferent, and apolitical student generation, but a different, and a more interesting and liberating, approach to politics. It might be that contemporary youth understands politics and political action in less fixed, and arguably, more

*rhizomatic*<sup>1</sup> terms. For instance, as Bernardi and Ghelfi (2010) suggest, *The Anomalous Wave movement* in Italy in 2008, when thousands of students protested in the streets and squares with the slogan ‘We won’t pay for your crisis’, declared precisely this ‘newly emergent subject at the centre of politics, without representation, articulating forms of the social movements expression in pragmatic and non-ideological terms that hold politics to be an open and radical process’ (2010: 111). This new approach to politics is also affirmed by Mason’s argument in this book.

Mason calls the young Britons ‘spontaneous horizontalists’ who seem to be almost allergic to representation politics or anything and anyone who attempts to restrict and reduce politics inside categorizations. In other words, they reject any kind of old-fashioned and mainstream politics with hierarchical, top-down, stable, and centralized structures of power: ‘...anybody who sounds like a career politician, anybody who attempts rhetoric, espouses an ideology, or lets their emotions overtake them is greeted with a visceral distaste’ (Mason, 2012: 44-45).

In Mason’s view, the new youth do not seem to struggle in the name of any ideology or political party. In other words, the new wave of student mobilizations is not driven by ideology, but it is most probably situated and immanent in more pragmatic and present problems which approach not only from an absent future after graduation but even more worryingly from a future which seems to be inextricably connected with a great debt.

For them it is arguably not a matter of which party is in power and which ideology it represents. They do not necessarily identify themselves with any particular political project. Rather, the conditions of their everyday life, the joblessness, the absent future, the debt, and the austerity caused by the neoliberal imperative drive them to act and react here and now. In other words, a new political era seems to unfold and spread as a *rhizome*, transforming the perception of political organization. As another journalist, Diego Beas, suggests the 15-M movement has contributed to the redefinition of politics in Spain:

The movement has studiously avoided engaging with ideological agendas, unions and, most importantly, professional politicians. It has filled city squares, co-

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1 Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘rhizome’ draws from its etymological meaning, where ‘rhizo’ means combining form and the biological term ‘rhizome’ describes a form of plant that can extend itself through its underground horizontal tuber-like root system and develop new plants.... Deleuzian rhizomatic thinking functions as an open-ended productive configuration where random associations and connections propel, sidetrack, and abstract relations between components. Any part within a rhizome may be connected to another part, forming a milieu that is decentred, with no distinctive end or entry point’ (Colman, 2005: 231-232).

ordinated online actions and targeted specific topics like banking and electoral reform. It has experimented with bottom-up networked approaches to challenge the rigid, top-down, party driven system that has dominated Spanish political life since 1978. City square by city square, individual meeting by individual meeting, thousands of citizens have come together in a networked approach to politics that is fresh and engaging because it defies, above anything else, the hierarchical approach favoured by vested interests. (cited in the Guardian, 15 Oct 2011)

Similarly, the young Britons are disengaged with conventional politics, or to put it simply, they are fed up with mainstream politics. They just want a different life, different politics, different economy, and if it is needed, they aggressively demand them:

We're sick of the government in general. For decades nobody legitimately can tell the truth; the nature of the hierarchy means only the imbeciles, the suck-ups, only the scumbags ever get to the top. So to truly be free is for everyone to take our part and decide for our freedom. (Mason, 2011: 58)

Or, as another student, who participates in the breaking of Top Shop, says: '...and because capitalism is a damn lie. That's why we are throwing stuff at these fucking shop fronts' (p. 59).

However, to play devil's advocate, do they really fight against capitalism or do they affirm what they try to question? Taking into account that neoliberal capitalism penetrates our very social relations, is it even possible to distinguish a definitive and palpable target of resistance? In other words, do those 'graduates with no future' (Mason, 2012: 66) raise their voices against the neoliberal capitalist logic or do they reproduce it? It may be that while actively resisting some aspects of neoliberal capitalism, young people might be fighting for other aspects of the same system. Employability, which this special issue focuses on, may be one notable example. Limited opportunities in the labour market, often despite having been assertive to the demands of employability, may have led students to question the outcomes of neoliberal capitalism and even the system itself. However, it is a question whether employability, a product of neoliberalism, has itself been challenged, or whether it is something that students are fighting for.

The contemporary university is increasingly concentrating its strategies around employability. At the same time, governments have pushed for further interdependence between the market and universities. Terms such as 'knowledge transfer' mentioned in most white papers on higher education in the UK are only one proof of the aggressive encouragement for tighter links between universities and industry, which has become the key education policy agenda of most British administrations since Thatcher. These trends may have produced 'autonomous' and 'entrepreneurial' subjects (Foucault, 2008: 233), who may be driven by and

would fight for employability, without challenging it. For example, they may want to go to the university in order to enhance their employability, but protest against the rise in tuition fees, which makes this opportunity less viable for them (Williams, 2013).

So, rather than blindly trusting these spontaneous horizontal networks, I suggest these are opened to scrutiny, approached as a 'battleground that is continually traversed by power differentials and lines of antagonistic force, from the production of the common to capitalist attempts to capture it' (Edu-Factory Collective, 2009: 0). In the aftermath of the dismantling of the welfare system and trade unionism, the employer, the state, and bankers have ceased to be the direct target of resistance, today neoliberalism itself constitutes the target. In fact, neoliberalism is diffused in our everyday lives, on the one hand, passing all the responsibility to the individual to be autonomous and self-entrepreneurial, but on the other hand, forces us to develop a tissue of bond, which connects us, but only by putting us in a constant competition with one other, for achieving, in the end of the day, to be included into the neoliberal norm of competition. Hence, it would, perhaps, be wiser to ask how collective organization as well as subjective experience, which do not affirm the neoliberal norms, can be achieved before the student protests of 2011 are over-celebrated as *the* main answer to the current crisis. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the protests, which Mason seems to put all his faith in, are not of importance or have nothing to say about the current historical moment. I am simply trying to warn the reader about the risk of rushing to buy into Mason's over-enthusiasm instead of critically reading his portrayal.

### **The role of technology and social networks**

Having visited the uprisings around the world, from Egypt to Greece and from Spain to Britain, Mason tries on the one hand to provide us with some very interesting, insightful stories and on the other hand sets out to explore and analyse the reasons behind this global unrest.

Mason makes various speculations about the causes of the global uprisings as well as their consequences. However, in many cases, he draws simplified conclusions without going in any depth. For instance, he frequently slides into technological determinism, overestimating the role that 'info-capitalism' and especially social networks, played in the unfolding of the global series of mobilizations:

The plebeian groups that kicked things off-from Iran in 2009 to Egypt, Libya, and Chile in 2011 possess, in fact, a surplus of the most valuable properties on earth:

skill, ingenuity and intelligence. Info-capitalism has educated them; social media is allowing them to swap experiences beyond borders. (p. 211)

In the last half of the fourth chapter his obsession with technology and his love for social networks become almost provocative. Here, technology is almost assumed to be the exclusive, driving political force rather than being only one of the heterogeneous, contingent, and partial components of the emerging political assemblage. Mason does not seem to have any doubt about the vital impact of social media on revolutionary politics and new forms of resistance. For him technology defines politics, and for him collectivism can only emanate from individualism, or to put it better from the 'networked individual' (p. 130). Throughout the book, Mason puts all his faith for emancipation in technology and especially in the Internet. Technology and even free market capitalism are over-celebrated for creating this new subjectivity called the 'networked individual'. The recent technological revolutions related to information (recording, storing, searchability as well as the networked availability of information; the digitization and globalization of commercial transactions and, of course, the expansion of social networks) are claimed to have empowered individuals and to have created space for counter network relations within the system. According to Mason, the 'networked individual' is the new revolutionary actor of our century who was created through the 'very values and practices of free market capitalism: individualism, choice, respect for human rights, the network, the flattened hierarchy – the masses have developed a new collective practice' (p. 80). Although he might be right to stress the potentialities of technology and particularly social networks in the new political activism, he seems, on the one hand, to have an instrumental understanding of technology as a tool to be used and, on the other hand, overlooks the hidden perils of his approach to technology as another neoliberal affirmation.

For instance, social media have been widely used, and in fact exploited, by corporations for their own interests, instead of being the new democratic tool that Mason advocates. In other words, social media can also be used towards the reproduction and reinforcement of individualism and consumerism so embedded in capitalist society. Therefore, a counter argument to Mason's would be that social media do not exclusively 'teach' us the democratic values mentioned above, but they also 'teach' us how to become 'better' consumers just with a couple of 'clicks'. For instance, our Facebook page is 'decorated' by all sorts of advertisements that we might find interesting and relevant to our consumer taste.

Even more worryingly, when Mason suggests that the 'networked individual' is the new revolutionary actor of our century who was created through the very

values and practices of free market capitalism: individualism, choice, respect for human rights, the network and so on, he praises the same set of political ideas and practices supported by neoliberalism. The promise of neoliberalism was exactly this: the autonomy of private individual to accumulate and enjoy property rights. At the same time, human rights have lost their initial meaning when at the international level the ramifications of the neoliberal project were the intervention of international law when national governments became an obstacle for the corporations to exercise their 'rights' to work towards profit beyond their borders, usually at the expense of the everyday lives of the local people (Gilbert, 2008: 32-33).

Although Mason has a fair point concerning the fundamental role that technology and particularly social media played in the new global unrest, the reader should not forget that technology, from university's labs to the everyday technological practices, is a site in which power and control as well as struggles and resistance are all at stake.

## Conclusion

Despite the at times uncomfortable jumps between first-person reportage, historic, economic, political, technological analysis, and some interesting as well as some sweeping claims, Mason's book is worth reading, if not for anything else, then for helping readers to form their own view on the new global mobilizations. But perhaps the present and the prospective readers of this book should read it through the lens of the reverse question: Why it's *not* kicking off everywhere (anymore)?

## Why it's *still* kicking off everywhere (2013)

I finished the review of Mason's first version of the book by asking why it's *not* kicking off everywhere *anymore*? But by the time I finished the review, Mason decided to argue that it is *still* kicking off everywhere. In the updated version of the book, he adds three new chapters on Spain, Greece, and Russia respectively, as well as a chapter that revisits the twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere. But is it really *still* kicking off everywhere? Although the twenty reasons why it is/should be kick(ing) off everywhere are *still* around, if not proliferating everyday, it seems like the tide of riots, demonstrations, and occupy movements was followed by an ebb. Can the new chapters convince the reader that it is *still* kicking of everywhere?

Although in chapter 13 Mason reminds us that the pleasant surprise of the riots in Russia, from the Football riots to Pussy riot, in Spain, and particularly in Greece, he also admits that resistance has been replaced by numb feelings of hopelessness and despair. He draws risky parallels between other historical periods and the present; for instance, when he compares the rise of Nazism in Germany and the increasing power of the fascist party, the Golden Dawn, in Greece. These are supported by melodramatic narration and grand claims: ‘...they [Greek young people] will be left with a choice between the politics of solidarity and what the director of *The Silver Lake* observed: a gruesome trend towards inhumanity’ (p. 240). He rushes to draw conclusions but does not ask those questions that are tormenting most of us who want to be an active part of the change.

In line with Mason’s claim in the second edition of the book, the recent summer has shown it is still kicking off in different parts of the globe (e.g. Turkey, Bulgaria, Brazil). However, even though the neoliberal expectations seem to have been shattered in the eyes of so many people around the world, why is it not consistently kicking off or effectively enough in order to really start liberating our lives outside of the neoliberal loop? Although the uprisings do say something about our frustration with the current political forms; and we, indeed, need to protest, we should not overlook many other marginalized experiences of resisting and/or subverting neoliberalism which are less loud and hence less noticeable. In other words, even when it seems that it is not kicking off or not with the same strength, it actually does. For instance, technology is indeed very important for the crafting of alternatives to the current forms of exploitation and injustice, but technology is not limited to the Internet and social media, which Mason seems to exclusively focus on. The literature informed by Science and Technology Studies explores exactly those more imperceptible and marginalized relations between politics and technoscience by treating technology as something much more than simply a tool. In other words, technological artefacts are not considered only as tools to be used in order to do radical politics but as co-producers of ‘new forms of life’; the very relation between subjects and objects, devices, set of practices becomes the transformational force which remakes our lives (for an extensive discussion on STS see Papadopoulos, 2010). As Ong and Collier remind us, ‘it remains important today to reflectively cultivate more partial and cautious propositions of observation that nonetheless grapple with ‘big’ questions’ (Ong and Collier, 2008: 17).



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## the author

Maria Vlachou is a PhD candidate at the School of Management of the University of Leicester. She has a background in sociology and migration & transnationalism. Her PhD deals with the globalization of higher education from a post-structuralist perspective. Maria's research interests include higher education, critical pedagogy, student movements, neoliberalism, migration, transnationalism, subjectivity, globalization and knowledge.

E-mail: [mvl01@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:mvl01@leicester.ac.uk)